

PHILEMON

INTRODUCTION

This is one of the most remarkable epistles in the Scripture. It is only one chapter; so you may have trouble finding it. If you can find Titus, just keep on going; if you find Hebrews, you have gone too far.

The Epistles (letters) in the New Testament were a new form of revelation. Before them, God had used law, history, poetry, prophecy, and the gospel records. When God used the Epistles, He adopted a more personal and direct method. And there are different kinds of epistles. Some were directed to churches; some were directed to individuals and are rather intimate.

Frankly, I believe that Paul had no idea his letter to Philemon would be included in the canon of Scripture, and I think he would be a little embarrassed. Reading this epistle is like looking over the shoulder of Philemon and reading his personal mail. Paul wrote this letter to him personally. That does not detract from the inspiration and value of this epistle. The Holy Spirit has included it in the Scriptures for a very definite reason.

Behind this epistle there is a story, of course. Philemon lived in a place called Colossae. It was way up in the Phrygian country in the Anatolian section of what is Turkey today. No city is there today -- just ruins. But it was a great city in Paul's day. One of Paul's epistles was written to the Colossian believers. There is no record that Paul ever visited Colossae, but since there are many things we do not know, I suspect that Paul did visit that city.

The story of this epistle was enacted on the black background of slavery. There were approximately sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire where the total population did not exceed one hundred twenty million. A slave was a chattel. He was treated worse than an enemy. He was subject to the whim of his master.

In Colossae was this very rich man who had come to a saving faith in Christ. He apparently had come down to Ephesus, as Paul was there for two years speaking in the school of Tyrannus every day, and people were coming in from all over that area to hear him. There were millions of people in Asia Minor, and Philemon was just one of the men who came to know the Lord Jesus.

Now Philemon owned slaves, and he had a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus took a chance one day, as any slave would have done, and made a run for it. He did what most runaway slaves apparently did -- he moved into a great metropolis. This slave made it all the way to Rome. In that great population, he could be buried, as it were, and never be recognized.

One day, this man Onesimus, who had been a slave, found out that there was a slavery in freedom and there was a freedom in slavery. When he was a slave, he didn't worry about where he was going to sleep or what he was going to eat. His master had to take care of that. Now he has a real problem in Rome. I can imagine him going down the street one day and seeing a group of people gathered around listening to a man. Onesimus wormed

his way into the crowd, got up front, and saw that the man was in chains. Onesimus had run away from chains, and he thought he was free, but when he listened to that man -- by the way, his name was Paul -- he thought, That man's free, and I'm still a slave -- a slave to appetite, a slave to the economy. I'm still a slave, but that man, although he is chained, is free.

Onesimus waited until the others had drifted away and then went up to Paul. He wanted to know more about what Paul was preaching, and Paul led him to Christ; that is, he presented the gospel to him, told him how Jesus had died for him and how He had been buried but rose again on the third day. He asked Onesimus to put his trust in Christ, and he did. Onesimus became a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Then Onesimus did what any man does who has been converted; he thought back on his past life and the things which were wrong that he wanted to make right. He said to Paul, "Paul, there is something I must confess to you. I'm a runaway slave." Paul asked him where he had come from, and Onesimus told Paul it was from Asia Minor, from the city of Colossae. Paul said, "There's a church over there. Who was your master?"

"My master was Philemon."
"You mean Philemon who lives on Main Street?"
"Yes."
"Why, he is one of my converts also. He owes me a great deal."
"Well, Paul, do you think I should go back to him?"
"Yes, you should. Onesimus, you must go back, but you are going to go back to a different situation. I will send a letter with you."

And we have his letter before us -- the Epistle of Paul to Philemon.

In the human heart there has always been a great desire to be free. But right now there are millions of Americans who are slaves to alcohol. They are not free. They are alcoholics. Then there are those who are slaves to drugs. There are those who are slaves to the economy. There are slaves to the almighty dollar. We are living in a day when people pride themselves on being free. They think they are free, but the Lord Jesus said, "If the Son makes you free, then are you free indeed" (see [John 8:36](#)). You will not get arguments for or against slavery from this epistle. What you do learn is the freedom that is above all the slavery of this world. It is the freedom that every one of us wants to have.

Outline

- I. Genial Greeting to Philemon and His Family, [Phm 1:1-3](#)**
- II. Good Reputation of Philemon, [Phm 1:4-7](#)**
- III. Gracious Plea for Onesimus, [Phm 1:8-16](#)**
- IV. Guiltless Substitutes for Guilty, [v. 17](#)**
- V. Glorious Illustration of Imputation, [v. 18](#)**
- VI. General and Personal Items and Requests, [Phm 1:19-25](#)**

Chapter 1

THEME: Revelation of Christ's love for us; demonstration of how brotherly love should work

The primary purpose of this epistle is to reveal Christ's love for us in what He did for us in pleading our case before God. This is one of the finest illustrations of substitution. "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught, put that on mine account" ([v. 18](#)). We can hear Christ agreeing to take our place and to have all our sin imputed to Him. He took our place in death, but He gives us His place in life. "If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself" ([v. 17](#)). We have the standing of Christ before God, or we have no standing at all. Onesimus, the unprofitable runaway slave, was to be received as Paul, the great apostle, would have been received in the home of Philemon.

The practical purpose is to teach brotherly love. Paul spoke of the new relationship between master and servant in the other Prison Epistles. Here he demonstrates how it should work. These men, belonging to two different classes in the Roman Empire, hating each other and hurting each other, are now brothers in Christ, and they are to act like it. This is the only solution to the problem of capital and labor.

Genial Greeting To Philemon And His Family (1:1-3)

Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow-labourer [[Philem. 1:1](#)].

Paul does not mention the fact that he is an apostle. When he was writing to the churches, he gave his official title: an apostle of Jesus Christ. But this is a personal letter to a personal friend. He doesn't need to defend his apostleship. He intended for this to be very personal, and I think he would really be surprised to know it can be read by the whole world.

"Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ." I have noticed that several of the commentaries try to change this and explain it away by teaching that Paul really meant that he was a prisoner because he was preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. But that is not what Paul said, and Paul had the ability of saying exactly what he had in mind. He was using the Greek language, which is a very flexible, versatile language. He said he was a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

If we had been there we might have had a conversation with Paul like this:

"Poor Paul, it's too bad these Romans put you in jail."
"They didn't put me in jail."
"Oh, we know what you mean. Those hateful religious rulers brought a charge against you."
"They didn't put me in jail either."
"Who put you in jail, then?"
"Jesus Christ. I'm His prisoner."
"You mean to tell me that you would serve Someone who would put you in prison?"
"Yes, when it's His will for me to be in prison, I'm in prison. When it's His will for me to be out of prison, I'll be out of prison. When it's His will for me to be sick, I'm going to be sick. I belong to Him. Since I

belong to Him, I have learned to be content in whatsoever state I am in.
Everything is all right. Don't worry about me."

Obviously, the letter to Philemon is one of the Prison Epistles. It goes along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.

"And Timothy our brother" is really "and Timothy the brother." That means he is not only Philemon's brother and Paul's brother, but he is your brother if you are a Christian. We all are brothers in Christ.

"Unto Philemon our dearly beloved." Does that sound as if Paul is really buttering him up? I think so. But he loved this man, and he is going to make a request of him.

[And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in thy house \[Philem. 1:2\].](#)

"And to our beloved Apphia." She apparently was the wife of Philemon. While Philemon is a Greek name, and he was a citizen of Colossae, Apphia is a Phrygian name. That would suggest to me that a young businessman by the name of Philemon went into new territory. He didn't go west as a young man; he went east -- way up on the frontier. He got into business in Colossae and became a wealthy man there. He met and married a Phrygian girl named Apphia. They both now have become Christians. Isn't that lovely?

"And Archippus our fellow-soldier." I would assume this is their son. He is not a soldier of the Roman army, but a soldier in the army of Jesus Christ. Paul had written elsewhere that we all are to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ.

"And to the church in thy house." Not only had they been converted, but they had a church in their house. Let's think about this for a moment. The church building has become so all-important to people today that it is all out of relationship to the real purpose of the local church. The local church in Paul's day wasn't down on the corner in a separate building -- they didn't have any building. There were the great temples to the pagan gods, but the early church didn't have buildings; they met in homes. It is estimated that for two hundred years the church met in homes.

The great cathedrals of the past were actually never meant for public meetings. Westminster Abbey in England, for example, was never intended for public services. It was built in the shape of a cross as a monument to Jesus Christ. Although I think they had the wrong idea -- instead of spending all that money on a cathedral, they should have used it to send out missionaries -- that was their way of expressing their devotion. The idea of putting the emphasis on a building and on a building program is a little out of line with the example of the early church.

[Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ \[Philem. 1:3\].](#)

This is the usual greeting of Paul to every person and every church to which he wrote.

Good Reputation Of Philemon (1:4-7)

[I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers \[Philem. 1:4\].](#)

Here is a man for whom Paul prayed. If you are writing out a prayer list of the apostle Paul, be sure to put Philemon on that list. The thought here is that every time Philemon's name was mentioned, Paul prayed for him. This would indicate that Philemon was a rather prominent person.

Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints [Philem. 1:5].

The life of Philemon was a testimony. Paul describes it in a lovely way. He showed love toward the Lord Jesus and toward other believers. His faith was toward the Lord Jesus, and he was faithful to other believers. That is interesting.

That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus [Philem. 1:6].

His faith was shared. The life of Philemon was a testimony. "Every good thing" was the result of the fact that ". . . it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother [Philem. 1:7].

Paul had great joy and consolation in the love of Philemon for other believers and for him.

"Bowels" or heart implies the entire psychological nature. It is the inner life of the believers that had great satisfaction through him.

There are many wonderful Christians across this land whom I have had the privilege of meeting, of being in their homes, and of having fellowship with them. That has been one of the greatest joys of my ministry. Philemon was the kind of person who would have entertained evangelists and conference speakers in his home. He was a marvelous individual.

Gracious Plea For Onesimus (1:8-16)

Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,

Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ [Philem. 1:8-9].

Paul is making a gracious plea for Onesimus. He is coming to the purpose of his letter. He approaches his subject diplomatically and cautiously and lovingly. He is going to make his request for Onesimus on a threefold basis:

"For love's sake." This is the love of Paul and Philemon for each other as believers in Christ Jesus.

"Being such an one as Paul the aged." Paul was only in his sixties, but he was an old man. He had suffered and had been persecuted as a missionary for Christ. This had aged him. Paul says to Philemon, "You know that I am an old man now."

"A prisoner of Jesus Christ." It is evident that he could not come to Philemon in person.

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds [Philem. 1:10].

Paul is pleading on behalf of his son. Paul was not married, but he had many sons. He calls Timothy and Titus his sons, and now Onesimus. These are his spiritual sons. He had led Onesimus to the Lord even though he himself was a prisoner at the time.

Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me [Philem. 1:11].

The name Onesimus means "profitable." Paul really has a play on words here that is tremendous. He is good at that, by the way. Since his name literally means profitable, Paul is saying, "When you had Profitable, you didn't have Profitable. Now that you don't have Profitable, you do have Profitable." You see, as a slave Onesimus wasn't very useful. He didn't work because he wanted to work. His heart wasn't in it, and I guess I can't blame him for that. But now Paul is sending him back to Philemon as a believer, and he says, "He is going to be profitable to you now. However, I don't want him to be received as a slave."

Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel [Philem. 1:12-13].

Paul is asking Philemon to receive Onesimus just as if he were receiving Paul. Now Paul admits that he would have liked to have kept Onesimus. I'm sure Paul would say, "My first thought was that this man knows how to serve, and I need somebody. I am here in prison, old and sick and cold. This fellow could help me. My first thought was to keep him here and just let you know that I have him here with me." But Paul couldn't do that. He says --

But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly [Philem. 1:14].

Paul is saying, "I wouldn't keep Onesimus because that wouldn't be right -- although I thought of it. If you willingly want to send him back to me, that will be all right." Did Philemon send Onesimus back to Paul? Again, that is something we do not know. I think he did. I would imagine that on the next boat going to Rome, there was Onesimus with a lot of things to add to Paul's comfort.

For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;

Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? [Philem. 1:15-16].

Since Onesimus has become a believer, his status and relationship to Philemon are different. He is still a slave according to the Roman law, but he is more than that to Philemon. He is now a beloved brother.

Guiltless Substitutes For Guilty (1:17)

This verse, together with the next verse, gives us one of the grandest illustrations of full substitution and imputation. Behind Paul's plea is Christ's plea to the Father on behalf of the sinner who trusts Christ as the Savior. That sinner is received on the same standing that Christ is received. In other words, the saved sinner has as much right in heaven as Christ has, for he has His right to be there. We are accepted in the beloved (see [Eph. 1:6](#)).

If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself
[Philem. 1:17].

"Since you count me as a partner, I want you to receive him just like you would receive me. You always put me up in that guest room. Don't send him out in the cold; put him up in the guest room."

Glorious Illustration Of Imputation (1:18)

If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught, put that on mine account [Philem. 1:18].

We think that the credit card is something new in our day. We can buy almost anything with a credit card -- from a gallon of gas to a chain of motels. Credit cards are used so much that one restaurant posted the sign: "We take money too."

Paul also had a credit card. He had a credit card because he was a believer in Christ. Paul says, "Look, if Onesimus stole something from you or did something wrong, just put it on my account. Put it on my credit card."

All of this is a glorious picture. When I come to God the Father for salvation, I can hear the Lord Jesus Christ say, "If Vernon McGee has wronged Thee or oweth Thee anything, put that on My account." Christ on the Cross paid the penalty for my sins. But that isn't all. I am sure that God the Father would say, "That fellow Vernon McGee is not fit for heaven." Then the Lord Jesus would say, "If Thou count Me therefore a partner, receive Vernon McGee as Myself." That is what it means to be in Christ -- accepted in the Beloved. Oh, what a picture this is of the way God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ accept you and accept me. That makes this a very precious epistle.

General And Personal Items And Requests (1:19-25)

I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides [Philem. 1:19].

"I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it." The Lord Jesus Christ gave His life and shed His blood to pay our entire debt of sin.

"Albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides." Paul had led Philemon to the Lord. How could he ever repay Paul for that?

Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord [Philem. 1:20].

Paul is pleading for Onesimus.

Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say [Philem. 1:21].

As you can see, this is a personal letter, and in a sense we are reading it over the shoulder of Philemon. Paul expresses his confidence in him and actually feels that Philemon will do more than he requests.

It is characteristic of real believers to do more than is requested. Jesus asks us to go the second mile. Maybe the reason that some of us are so poor today is that we have been stingy with the Lord. The Lord is a generous Lord. We should be generous people.

But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you [Philem. 1:22].

Paul expects to be released from prison. He requests prayers for that purpose. Since this letter was probably written during Paul's first confinement in Rome, he was released and probably visited Philemon personally.

There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow-prisoner in Christ Jesus;

Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow-labourers.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen [Philem. 1:23-25].

This beautiful little letter concludes with personal greetings to mutual friends.

Bibliography

(For Bibliography to Philemon, see Bibliography at the end of 2 Timothy.)